

Singing Is a Municipal Project in St. Paul

Choruses a Desirable Civic Asset Experience of One City Proves; No Room, Thousands Turned Away From Affairs Staged Recently

By EARL CHRISTMAS

SINGING is a desirable civic asset. At least, that is the illuminating experience of St. Paul, Minnesota, where the taxpayers are spending good, hard dollars to encourage it. Singing, in the Minnesota city, is a municipal project, supported by city funds and directed by city officials, the same as the public schools or the workhouse.

This unusual municipal activity functions through the Municipal Chorus, the first chorus in the country organized and supported by a city. The project was started two years ago, and now, with the growth of the organization as a public institution, officials in St. Paul are convinced that the promotion of singing pays dividends. Singing is just as necessary as the parks, in St. Paul, and it has a place in the budget almost as securely.

Indeed, the Municipal Chorus in St. Paul has become a public institution. It has come to stand for the city much as a fine orchestra may stand for another city musically. It has a part in every patriotic celebration along with the mayor of the city and other time-honored institutions demanded for the observance of any public event. It may be the celebration of Washington's birthday, or Memorial Day, perhaps a Thanksgiving festival, or whatever the occasion of civic or community interest, the Municipal Chorus is sure to have a part. The people have come to expect it, and they like it.

Men and women like to sing. That was one of the convictions of the men who organized the chorus. So, one of the objects of the chorus was to afford an opportunity of expression to these men and women who like to sing. This, the chorus has done, in ever-increasing measure, but more than that, it has furnished good musical entertainment to thousands of men and women in St. Paul. Free concerts and entertainments are given from time to time, and if you wish to know the place the Municipal Chorus holds in the community you need only try to get into the auditorium for one of these performances.

Take the presentation of "The Bohemian Girl," for instance. Crowds packed the street in front of the auditorium for a block when the last seat had been taken. Between 5,000 and 10,000 persons tried in vain to crowd into the auditorium for that performance. And the auditorium is not a small building, the theater portion set for the opera holding some 4,000 people.

Indeed, the crowds attracted by the performances have constituted the one obstacle in the promotion of the chorus, according to James M. Clancy, commissioner of parks and playgrounds, under whose department the work of the chorus comes. Increasing the number of performances of each concert has tended to obviate some of the difficulty, but even so, the Municipal Chorus has found itself at times beset with too much popularity.

Pre-eminently a public institution, the chorus is unique in that it admits into its ranks all who come knocking at its doors, be they grand opera singers or persons who never had a day of voice training in their lives.

"We have no voice test for admission," said Gus B. Wollan, organizer and president of the chorus. "Any one who wishes to sing is free to come and join with us."

"You know, people like to sing. Some of them never had an opportunity to get any training, and here is a chorus where they can start out on an equality with men and women who have been trained in grand opera. So, they jump at the chance."

"Only a very small per cent of those joining the chorus have had special voice training. Some who come have little ability to sing, but we never turn anyone away. To one who likes to sing, there is pleasure in taking part in chorus work of this kind. A great many came at first who couldn't sing, but those who can't sing usually drop out. You see, those who can sing are the ones who get the greater enjoyment out of their work, and they are the persons who will stick through the year. But anyway, we never turn any one away. That is one of the objects of the chorus, to give an opportunity of expression to every man, woman or child who likes to sing. So, however poor may be

the efforts of any member, he is never turned away from the chorus.

"The singer gets enjoyment out of the work, even if others may not benefit so much. To many, the chorus may be the only means of recreation, and we don't want to deny this means of expression to anyone. Rather we have tried to encourage all who like to sing to join the chorus."

"However, those who can't sing so well usually do not remain in the chorus so long, and the chorus has been able to obtain some unusually fine results."

"We have singers of almost every graduation of ability in the chorus, suggestive of the popular appeal of the organization. We have five members who have sung in grand opera choruses. One member of the chorus was a member of the Chicago Grand Opera Company before coming to St. Paul, and another was with the Metropolitan Grand Opera Company in New York. Another was a member of the old Boston Ideals. Others sang in church choirs, and some never had any training whatever."

"But here in the chorus, they all get together on a common basis, and they all enjoy it. Even the former grand opera singers, though accustomed perhaps to more finely trained voices of the professional chorus, like the work and the results. They marvel at the things our director is able to accomplish, taking a mixed group of varying capacities this way, and so they enter whole-heartedly into the work, helping along where they can those who are just

"Besides affording opportunity of expression to singers, and entertainment in a musical way for the public, the chorus is worth while as a municipal project in that it helps materially to elevate musical standards. We gave three performances of Handel's 'The Messiah,' which competent musical critics rated as the best ever given in the Northwest."

"The chorus has given other performances that one might not expect from a public chorus of this kind. We gave one performance of Haydn's Oratorio 'The Creation,' and another of Cowen's 'The Rose Maiden.' We gave Balfe's 'The Bohemian Girl,' in full costume and with all the parts taken by members of the chorus. Even all the solo parts were taken by members of the chorus. We had a former actor for a stage director, and everything went off like a professional performance."

"Well, the night that performance was given, the auditorium didn't have a chance when it came to holding the crowds. Between 5,000 and 10,000 persons were turned away. Now, we endeavor to arrange for several performances of any given entertainment, so that fewer people will be disappointed." The Municipal Chorus was organized in January, 1919, Mr. Wollan, then secretary to Mayor L. C. Hodgson, and Leopold Bruenner, present director of the chorus, being the leaders in its formation.

"I had had the plan in mind for several years," Mr. Wollan said. "For a long time, I had felt the need of some organization, in which persons could express themselves in song, some place where they could go and sing even if they never had had any training. So the idea struck me that here is a proper function for a city to undertake."

"I talked the matter over with Mr. Bruenner, and we decided to go to Mr. Clancy. The city commissioner was enthusiastic about the plan. So everything was easy. We found that lots of people want to sing—we never have had less than 150 in the chorus—and large numbers wished to hear them."

"The chorus was organized in January. In five weeks, this group of mixed voices had been worked into a chorus and the first performance given. We have kept up the pace since that time. As soon as one entertainment is completed, the members are eager to start another."

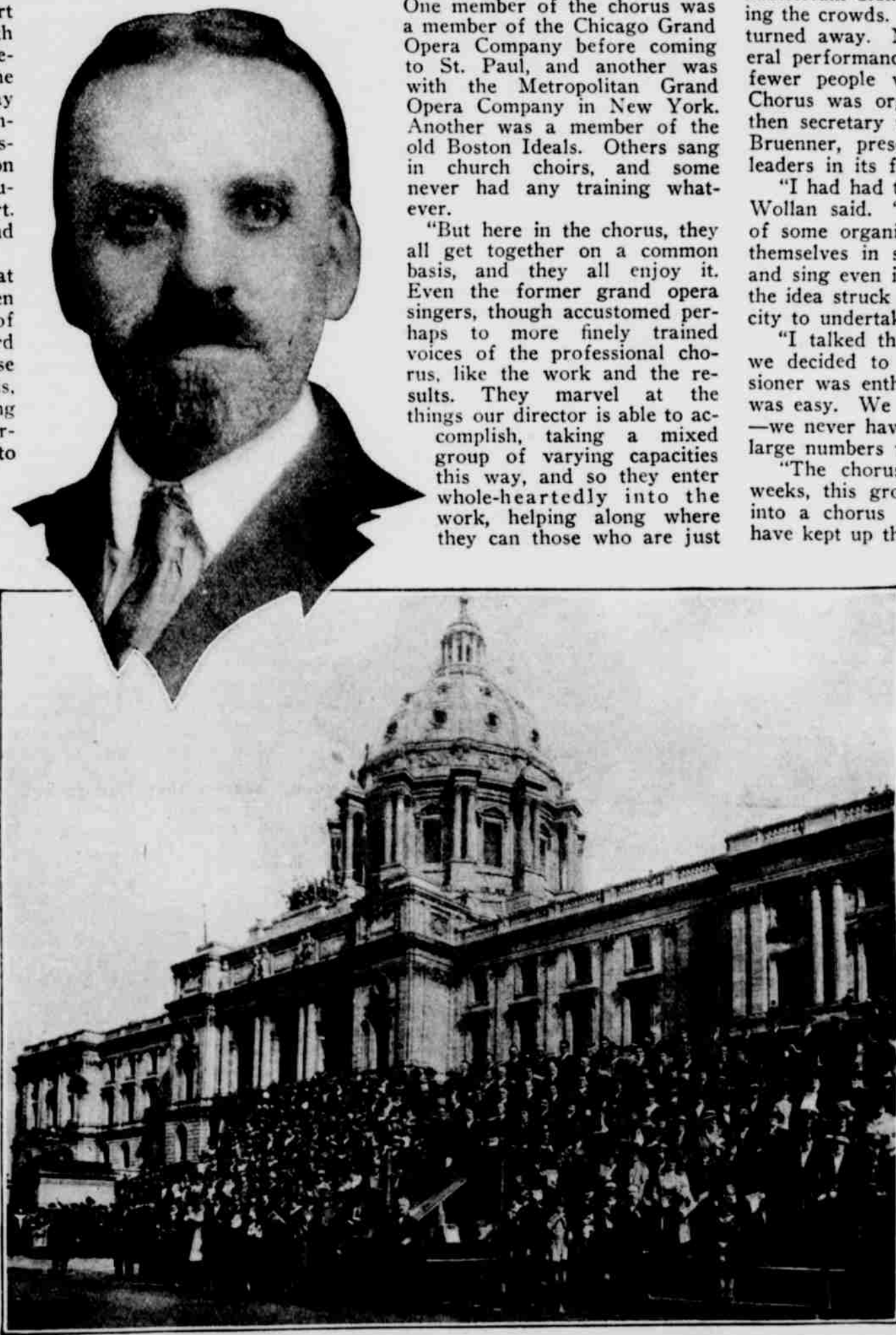
"The St. Paul chorus was the first and, I am advised, still is the only chorus in the country supported municipally. But it is more than an experiment. We have found it exceedingly worth while both to the singers and to the public. I am sure that other choruses of the kind will spring up over the country, as cities begin to appreciate the value of music as a civic asset. We teach it in the public schools. Why not give the people out of the schools a chance to sing, and those who like an opportunity to hear them? There's nothing like a good, old singing bee for those who really like to sing."

Entertainments, of the Municipal Chorus, announced under the auspices of the St. Paul Department of Parks and Playgrounds, always attract big crowds. Newspapers give generous space to the events, and thousands gather for the free music festivals. The entertainment may be an oratorio, or it may be a light opera. Again, it may be some holiday festival, in which the Municipal Chorus takes a part, or a free concert in a park.

Frequently, the entertainment given by the chorus is augmented by a special orchestra, made up of members of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, who are glad to join in the presentation of better music to the public at these free entertainments. Music for the public by the public might characterize the work that the Municipal Chorus is doing.

All expenses of the Municipal Chorus, including the salary of the director and like items of expense, are paid out of a special fund voted each year by the city council.

"We feel that the Municipal Chorus is essentially a public institution," said Commissioner Clancy. "And we feel it is necessary, just as the parks are necessary. A city must provide for the recreation of its people if it is to perform its full duty, and music is one of the best ways. The chorus provides enjoyment for those who sing, and entertainment for the thousands who hear it yearly. Our only trouble has been that we can't take care of the crowds. But then, that only proves the value of such a chorus to the people of a wide-awake city."



Above—G. B. WOLLAN, who organized, in St. Paul, the first chorus supported by a city. Below—This picture, taken on the steps of the Minnesota state capitol during a holiday observance, is symbolic of the Municipal Chorus as a public institution. The chorus aids in the celebration of every holiday and has a part in nearly all public observances in St. Paul.

learning to sing. Incidentally, we have in the chorus men and women who are getting their first lessons in singing.

"You can't imagine how much people like to sing unless you have had an experience with a public chorus of this kind. We have one Civil War veteran in the chorus. He is 72 years old, but he is just as enthusiastic as the girl of 16, who represents the other extreme. In several cases, husbands and wives are members of the chorus. In quite a number of instances, mothers and their daughters and fathers and their sons belong to the chorus. Nearly half of the women in the chorus are married women, and most of them are women with children. So great is the interest in the work, that the chorus keeps up its rehearsals even through the summer months. When other activities lagged or stopped with the coming of hot weather, the members of the chorus objected to stopping the weekly rehearsals or holding them less frequently."